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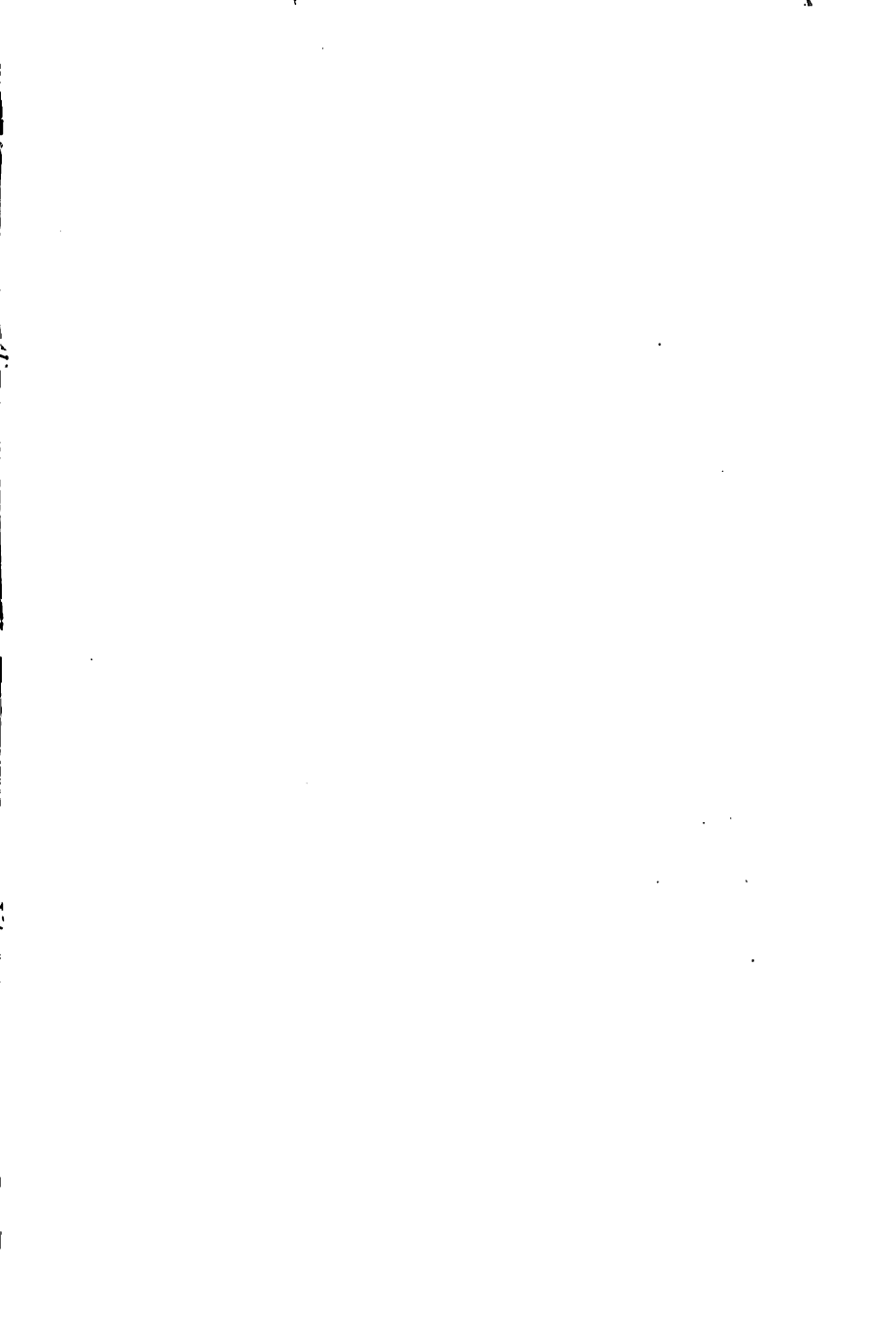


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GIVEN IN HONOR OF HIS PARENTS, THEIR SIMPLICITY
SINCERITY AND FEARLESSNESS



Cover

Sedley Taylor.

THE
ETHICS
OF
CONFORMITY AND SUBSCRIPTION.

BY
HENRY SIDGWICK, M.A.,

LATE FELLOW OF TRINITY COLLEGE,
CAMBRIDGE.

—◆—
"Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind."—ST. PAUL.
—◆—



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TO THE READER.

THE relation between the Free Christian Union and the writers whose essays may appear under its name, will readily be inferred from its fundamental principle, of spiritual fellowship with mental independence. Each writer may be presumed to approve of the design and basis of the Union; but the Union does not, conversely, assume responsibility for his individual judgments or reasonings. If its object were to recommend the opinions of a school, care would be taken to secure consistency of exposition and harmony of impression in its several productions. But, aiming as it does to release Christian Unity from the obligation of intellectual uniformity, it will rather welcome than reject the opportunity of presenting under various aspects the subjects with which its publications deal, and of helping the reader, by the influx of comparative lights, to more effective thought and arger sympathy.



"Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind."

THE ETHICS OF CONFORMITY AND SUBSCRIPTION.

I wish to discuss in this pamphlet the duty which the persons who form the progressive—or, to use a neutral term, the deviating—element in a religious community owe to the rest of that community; the extent to which, and the manner in which, they ought to give expression and effect to their opinions within the community; and the point at which the higher interests of truth force them to the disruption of old ties and cherished associations. I do not propose to treat the question as a theological one. Of course this would be a very natural mode of treatment; and in an age like the first age of Protestantism, when men still believed that there was some one form of organization and set of doctrines to which the Divine favour was attached, but were disagreed as to which these were, any other view of the question would seem idle. The inquiry, ther

could simply be, what degree of variation from the true standard involved deadly error. Even now, it may be held by some, that if a man has the misfortune to hold erroneous opinions, he ought to keep them to himself, and outwardly appear to believe what he does not believe, rather than aggravate his guilt by the open rejection of saving truth. Or, they may hold that such a man is so certain to do wrong, that it is not worth while discussing what he ought to do. Nay, men may even believe, in some vague way, that the favour of Heaven rests on a particular religious community, even though they may be unable to accept its distinctive theological opinions; or, rather, though they may have renounced most of its dogmas, but not the one dogma that asserts the peculiar salvatory efficacy of its discipline. To minds so constituted I shall not attempt to appeal, and it is the less necessary for me to do so, as the mind of England, in spite of much that has been said and written of late, is, after all, Protestant to the core; and holds, that the spiritual welfare of man is not bound up with any ecclesiastical organization or ceremonial system, but depends on a right state of the feelings, and a right attitude of the will, sustained by a right apprehension of the nature of God, and of His purposes and dealings with men.

And, on the whole, the recognition of the necessity of free inquiry, and of the possibility of conscientious difference of opinion, almost without limit, is so general, that most of my readers will be prepared to discuss the question on the neutral ground of ethics. The general

distinction between "essentials and non-essentials" is one that we cannot pass over in considering it, but no particular view of this distinction need influence the argument, which will simply assume that there is such a distinction, more or less definite, recognized in the theological thought of communities and individuals, but varying from community to community and from individual to individual.

It is necessary, however, to separate this question from another one, that in the minds of most men mixes with it and predominates over it. The blending is very natural, but at the same time it is the cause of the haze which hangs over the whole subject at present. It is very difficult for men, in all political and social discussions, to keep the ideal quite distinct from the actual, and not sometimes to prescribe present conduct on grounds which would only be valid if a distant and dubious change of circumstances were really certain and imminent. It is peculiarly difficult in discussing religious organizations, for these seem to depend, more directly than political, on the speculative belief of their members; and in theology it is harder than in politics, for an ardent believer, especially if his beliefs be self-chosen, and not inherited, not to think that the whole world is on the point of coming round to his opinions. And hence the religious persons who, by the divergence of their opinions from the orthodox standard of their church, have been practically led to consider the subject of this pamphlet, have often been firmly convinced that the limits of their church must necessarily be

enlarged at least sufficiently to include themselves ; and have rather considered the method of bringing about this enlargement, than what ought to be done until it is effected. But when we survey, impartially, the development of religious thought from the Reformation to the present time ; when we observe how the varieties of beliefs throughout the civilized world, and in Protestant countries the variety of religious organizations, have continually increased—the interval between the extremes widening, and the intermediate opinions, or shades of opinion, becoming more numerous ; when we see how little the outward organization, symbols, and formulas of the different religious communities have been affected by the discoveries of science or the changes of philosophy, or the successive predominance of novel ideas, novel hopes and aspirations, in the political and social spheres—we shall feel it presumptuous to prophecy that any so great revolution is now impending in the nature, extension, and mutual relations of the recognized creeds of Christendom, as to render a discussion like the present unnecessary.

But, further, it is by no means clear, that if some great change in the external organization of religion has been rendered necessary by the development of thought, such a change will not be effected, in the most simple and natural manner, by the spontaneous combination of individuals acting within or without the churches that at present exist, according as each may understand his duty. In the sphere of secular politics, a sober-minded philanthropist gradually learns to divide

into three classes the reforms which he is anxious to bring about: those which he can begin to carry out himself, trusting to the direct effect of his individual energy and the indirect influence of his example; those which it is worth while to attempt, if a sufficiently powerful private organization can be set on foot; and those which necessitate the intervention of the State, and, consequently, a great stirring of the public mind on the subject. In religious matters, among educated persons, of late years, it has perhaps been too much the custom to neglect the first of these methods; to sit with folded hands and wait till matters are ripe for great and sudden change; when perhaps the substitution of a gradual change for a sudden one, would be as great a boon as they could confer upon society; and when, by neglecting some simple and natural rule of personal conduct, they at once aggravate the certain evil that exists, and the probable evil of its remedy.

I do not, then, maintain that the principles on which the Christian churches in England are constituted, and their customary discipline, are satisfactory: indeed, I think that organic change is required in the constitution of the established Church, and even that an organized effort ought speedily to be made to bring about such a change. But we shall better discuss the rules that should govern the private conduct of individuals in religious matters, if we separate the moral question from the ecclesiastical, and assume the traditional systems, avowed doctrines, and official action of the religious communities to remain unaltered.

It may be said, however, that this moral question (like most moral questions) is a very old one ; that it must have been settled long ago, and that there can be no particular advantage in raising it just now.

It will be as well, therefore, to notice the characteristics of the present state of religious thought, which appear to furnish the fresh conditions that render a fresh inquiry* desirable.

The first of these lies in the large strides that we have recently made towards complete civil and social equality of creeds. The secular disadvantages that religious dissidences formerly entailed, have been so rapidly diminishing, that we may look forward confidently to their speedy extinction. We have abolished church rates ; we are inaugurating a system of primary education, which is, at any rate, designed to place all sects, as far as possible, on a par ; and it is obvious that the ecclesiastical restrictions on the higher education cannot be much longer maintained. A nonconformist is as eligible for any purely civil function, from legislation downwards, as a conformist who is unconnected with the landed aristocracy : indeed, the high-water mark of toleration was indicated at the last general election, by the balanced debate among educated persons as to whether violent and obtrusive atheism should be considered a disqualification for the House of Commons. Moreover, the tone and manner adopted towards dissidents by the adherents, even the ministers, of the establishment, has changed with the changing times,—partly, perhaps, from policy, partly, no doubt, from natural and

sincere expansion of sympathy. The effort to unite cordially with Dissenters, wherever such union is possible, has ceased to be the differencing characteristic of one party in the Church of England; and it is but rarely that a conformist dares to avow in public any sentiment but respect for conscientious nonconformity. Even those who are fighting for the relics of Anglican privilege, have altered the lines of their defence; and instead of sharp, stern monitions of the sin of schism, offer voluble and pathetic appeals to "our common Christianity." These changes in external circumstances and general opinion inevitably affect our view of the propriety of lax conformity as a question of private conduct. As long as a man's religious profession exercised a powerful influence on his secular prospects and social position, it was impossible that it should be decided solely (as it ought to be decided) by religious sympathies and theological agreement. As long as the spirit of sectarianism drew barriers between sect and sect, that prevented the interchange of thought and sympathy and narrowed the intellectual and spiritual life of each, higher considerations than those of mere worldly interest might induce a man to attach himself to the most comprehensive. The sectarian spirit is by no means extinguished among us. But, on the one hand, it is more and more confined to its proper sphere, and has less and less influence on the social relations or on the intellectual and even the spiritual development of individuals. On the other hand, it has become more and more manifest that enforced external union

persons whose theological differences are not subdued by their religious sympathies, exacerbates rather than mollifies the schismatic temper.

Yet again, this toleration is not (in England, at least, and as I know it) the mere drapery of enlightened unbelief; nor is it a mere external compromise, due to the political maxims or indifferentist inclinations of secular persons. It has a deeper root in the present tendencies of religious thought; and not of religious thought only, but of all thought on subjects where first principles and method are as yet indeterminate, and where therefore persons of equal intelligence, sincerity, and application, are continually led to the most profoundly diverse conclusions. Controversies on such subjects are carried on, not perhaps less keenly than before, but more fairly, temperately, and dispassionately, with more mutual understanding, and, we may almost say, mutual interest, in the conflicting opinions. This tempered dogmatism must be carefully distinguished from the superficial eclecticism that sometimes results from the same causes, the state of mind that prides itself on holding no form of creed in particular, but combining the best parts of all: this latter is not, I think, peculiarly characteristic of the present age; what I am noticing is the habit of holding opinions firmly and earnestly, and yet, as it were, at arm's length, of seeing how they look when viewed on the outside, and divining by analogy how the opinions of others look when viewed on the inside. A dogmatist

of this temper has a natural respect for, even a spontaneous sympathy with, any one who holds any creed with consistency, clearness, and sincerity. Accordingly, one result of this increase of real internal toleration on the part of dogmatists, is to encourage much greater openness and unreserve on the part of heretics of all kinds and degrees. This openness is sometimes deplored by ecclesiastical writers and speakers, but in the present strained relations of intellectual culture and religious faith, the most fatal mistake that can be made in the interests of the latter, next to that of discouraging theological inquiry as sinful, is to discourage the expression of theological disagreement as unedifying. It would be a great gain to religion if preachers would abandon all idea of restricting inquiry and discussion, and confine themselves entirely (in so far as they deal with the question) to improving the method of inquiry, and elevating the manner of the discussion.

For finally, this frankness, even audacity, in theological investigation and discussion, is rendered especially necessary by a fact, the influence of which upon theology is often noticed, although not quite from this point of view—I mean the increasing predominance of positive science as an element of our highest intellectual culture. It is sometimes argued that to the modern mind, imbued with the methods of positive science, and fascinated by the certainty of its conclusions, theology must inevitably become more and more shadowy and unreal, and its interminable debates more and more

distasteful. But against this it may be urged that the scientific inquiries which are most eagerly pursued, and excite the keenest interest in lookers-on, are precisely those where the method is least determinate, the reasonings most hypothetical, and the conclusions most disputable. Nor is the contemptuous disparagement or the dictatorial regulation of the method of theology, to which the students of positive science are prone, worthy of serious consideration. Persons of wide interests and eager constructive impulse are constantly endeavouring to transcend the limits which nature and circumstances have set to their intellectual range, and pronouncing upon the knowableness of that which is to themselves unknown; but the futility of such efforts has been amply demonstrated by a wide experience. What theology has to learn from the predominant studies of the age is something very different from advice as to its method or estimates of its utility; it is the imperative necessity of accepting unreservedly the conditions of life under which these studies live and flourish. It is sometimes said that we live in an age that rejects authority. The statement, thus unqualified, seems misleading; probably there never was a time when the number of beliefs held by each individual, undemonstrated and unverified by himself, was greater. But it is true that we only accept authority of a particular sort; the authority, namely, that is formed and maintained by the unconstrained agreement of individual thinkers, each of whom we believe to be seeking truth with single-mindedness and sincerity, and declaring what he has

found with scrupulous veracity, and the greatest attainable exactness and precision. In respect of theologians, for the most part, we have hitherto been able to feel no such security. Theology has gone as far as the moral sense and natural instincts of mankind would allow (and the limit is certainly elastic), in discouraging single-minded inquiry, discouraging exactness of statement, discouraging sincerity of utterance. It has dwelt on the imbecility of the inquisitive intellect, the inadequacy of language to express profound mysteries, the unedifying effect of truth upon an unprepared audience. I do not mean that these topics are now so prominent as they once were. It is just because a change is taking place in this respect; because among the most orthodox theologians there are men imbued with the best qualities of the scientific spirit; because the tide of opinion is moving in this direction, and the conviction is daily growing among earnestly religious Protestants of all shades, that the exceptional protection that has been claimed for theological truth is a fatal privilege; that the time seems to me to have come for a dispassionate discussion of the subject of this pamphlet. If English Protestants accept as a fact which they cannot alter, that the divergence of religious beliefs, conscientiously entertained by educated persons, is great, is increasing, and shows no symptom of diminution; if they admit the principles of complete toleration and complete freedom of inquiry; if they admit the importance of our feeling, when we are instructed on matters of the highest moment, the same security which we feel on less

important subjects, that our teacher is declaring to us truth precisely as it appears to him, without reserve or qualification ; then how are they to organize their religious instruction, and combine in a common formula of worship ? what are to be the terms of membership in their churches, and the conditions of performing ministerial functions, in so far as these are determined, not by express provisions, but by common understanding ?

It may be said that after all this question cannot need many words : an honest man can settle it on the simple principles of ordinary morality. He has only to refuse ever to say what he does not believe, or violate in the least point any engagement into which he has entered, and to join the Church that he believes to be the best, and he cannot go wrong. The answer is that if it could be so simply settled, honest men would be practically found to settle it in the same way. But every one's experience will tell him that this is not the case. Take ten honest laymen of education, members of the Church of England, neither fanatical nor indifferent in their religion, and whose thoughts have been turned to this subject. Is it not most probable that at least half of them will admit that the conditions of religious union necessitate some relaxation of the strict rule just mentioned, and that each of these will differ from the others as to the proper limits of this relaxation ? I have said "members of the Church of England," as it is to these that my remarks are principally directed ; but they apply (to some extent at least) to members of

other denominations. No doubt, in an established Church, whose relations to the State are, theoretically, very undefined, with a prescribed formula of worship, and an elaborate official creed three centuries old, the perplexities of this question reach their maximum ; but they must be also felt by an increasing number of highly-educated nonconformists, whose experience has convinced them of the evils of sectarianism, while they have gradually come to consider some or all of the distinctive doctrines and principles of their respective churches as erroneous or doubtful, or at any rate comparatively unimportant. Of course the most natural *primâ facie* view of most churches is, that they are associations of persons holding special doctrines ; that each member of them holds these doctrines ; and that when any member has made up his mind that he does not hold them, he withdraws. And especially where, as is the case in most of our churches, each member has made, on admission to the privileges of membership, a more or less precise declaration * of adhesion, not to the distinctive teaching of the Church, but to certain doctrines selected as fundamental.

Still this assumption would not correspond to the actual facts of the case, even in the strictest sect. I do not mean merely that members *do* not always withdraw

* As this declaration, in Congregationalist churches, is in no set form, it may vary indefinitely in strictness, and it is difficult to ascertain the actual practice at any time in respect of it. Unitarians exact no expression of doctrinal agreement ; nor do Wesleyans, unless the avowal of a felt need of salvation from sin be so regarded.

when they have ceased to hold any of these fundamental doctrines; but it is not expected that they should withdraw: they violate no common understanding in not withdrawing.

And this is because feelings that every one must respect make it impossible for a man voluntarily to abandon a church as easily as he would withdraw from a scientific or philanthropic association. The ties that bind him to it are so much more intimate and sacred, that their severance is proportionably more painful. The close relations of kinship and friendship in which he may stand to individual members of the congregation, present an obstacle to severance which all, in practice, recognize, if not in theory; but even to the community itself, and its worship, he is still bound by the strong bands of hereditary affection, ancient habit, and, possibly, religious sympathies outliving doctrinal agreement. These considerations, it may be said, ought not to weigh against the fact of fundamental disagreement; but a common case—probably the commonest at the present day—is when the point at issue, though selected as fundamental by the Church, is not so regarded by the divergent: it may very likely appear to him to possess no religious importance whatsoever. A man who feels no impulse to leave a community, and sees no gain in joining any other, can hardly be expected to excommunicate himself; others, sympathizing with his motives, shrink from excommunicating him; and thus “multitudinism” (to use Mr. Wilson’s phrase) creeps in, tacitly, but not illegitimately,

even into churches avowedly based upon a different principle.

No objection can be made to this result if it be clearly understood on both sides; no one, at any rate, can object to it who deprecates the narrowness of the avowed basis upon which most sects are framed. But it would seem that the duty of making his position clear rests with the divergent; and if his position is not made clear, if the terms of membership are merely relaxed in the esoteric opinion of the enlightened few, if he gives other men fair reason for believing that he holds opinions which he does not hold,—then his conduct can only be defended on grounds on which all other religious hypocrisy may be defended. “*Toutes les déceptions*” (to adapt a phrase of Auguste Comte’s) “*sont solidaires*,” and the heretical Protestant layman who deliberately passes for orthodox, has an uncomfortable family likeness to the infidel Popish priest who prostrates himself before the Bambino.

It cannot, however, be seriously maintained, that any such deception is involved in the profession of membership of the Church of England. What is involved in this profession it would not be easy to say: indeed it is a question which does not admit of a definite answer, as there are several conflicting theories on the subject, framed upon radically different principles, and no authority to decide which is the sound one. The extreme view on one side is, that the National Church is coextensive with the nation, and therefore every Englishman a member of the Church of England. That

he ought to be so, and would be so in a satisfactory state of things, is of course the view of a large and influential party; but that he actually is so was maintained with apparent gravity, during the late Irish Church controversy, by the learned and vehement Professor Brewer. On the other hand, most of the clergy, I believe, lay down that the Apostles' Creed * is binding upon the Anglican laity. In saying this, they probably mean that this Creed is what the Church should be conceived as *wishing* the laity to hold, rather than what she must be considered as *expecting* them to hold. If they mean the latter, they certainly declare a private opinion, and not a common understanding. No doubt, when we look at the position which this summary of dogma occupies in the ceremonies of Baptism and Confirmation, it seems most natural to regard the Church as an association of persons holding all this dogma; but, practically, no one dreams of seceding (or expecting another to secede) from the Church of England because he cannot assent to this or that statement of the Apostles' Creed. That a secession on such grounds alone would strike every one as absurd, is the clearest possible proof that the common understanding in the Church of England is not that a man believes the whole of the Apostles' Creed, but that he has been taught the whole of it, and believes as much as he thinks necessary.

* "Only the Apostles' Creed," as I have generally heard it put. This seems a trifling burden, no doubt, in comparison with the Thirty-nine Articles.

In fact, all this attempt to define lay-membership seems idle to most practical men. "The Church of England," they seem to hold, "is composed of respectable persons who are willing to go to church. Any further definition is pedantic and superfluous." I am very far from wishing to thin our churches by raising scruples in the breast of any respectable person; and so long as the sole ecclesiastical function of the laity is to go to church, the question may perhaps be left in this vague condition. But even now, in the case of offices of trust and emolument that are restricted to members of the Church of England, some definition is required, and where a declaration of *bonâ fide* membership is made by the candidate for such an office, is urgently necessary; as even a strict test, clearly understood, is less vexatious and demoralizing than one that is lax but ill-defined. It may be said, however, that as all such tests and restrictions, the last relics of Anglican privilege, will soon be swept away, the question is scarcely worth discussing in this connection. And I trust that this is so; but, meanwhile, there seems great prospect of its being raised in a new quarter. We have heard of late a tolerably loud and apparently increasing cry, in which persons with very different ultimate objects join, that some share should be given to the laity in ecclesiastical administration. Before any practical machinery can be devised for satisfying this demand, it will be necessary to define who the laity are. I should propose to define them as persons who, having been baptized according to the rites of the

Church of England, have not formally seceded; or, who do not object to pay church-rates. If the line were drawn more strictly (as, *e.g.*, to include only communicants), so many persons would be excluded—especially when their attention was thus pointedly drawn to their actual theological position—that disestablishment, followed by still further division, would be almost inevitable.

But it is sometimes said, that a lay member of the Church of England must, at any rate, be a person who goes to church, and takes part in the Anglican service; that this service, besides including the recital of two, and sometimes three creeds, implies throughout the system of doctrines of which these creeds are the definite expression; that there cannot be more obvious hypocrisy than that of taking part in a service without believing the doctrines which it implies; that as we cannot suppose a conscientious person doing this, and as in a theoretical discussion of the subject we consider only conscientious persons, the Church of England is already even more strictly limited, *in theory*, than the straitest of the clergy maintain. Here, again, at first sight, there seems much to be said for this view; but it is clearly in conflict with common sense and the common understanding upon the subject, and fails to recognize the conditions under which alone a formula of national worship is possible. Just as no one means by the Church of England, an association of persons who believe all the doctrines contained in the creeds, and all the assumptions implied in the prayers, so it is clear that a church so defined could not continue to exist on its

present footing. The service of a national church, I think, ought to be (as the service of the Church of England, roughly speaking, is) framed in accordance with the theological convictions of the majority of the nation. The common understanding is, and, I think, ought to be, that the dissentient minority take part or do not take part in it, according to each man's estimate of the importance of his degree of dissent from its assumptions. Now, I should protest against the view that would leave the whole question of the duty of conformity and nonconformity to be settled by individual instinct and sentiment; it seems to me to proceed from a mere desire to evade the difficulties of the question. But this particular point can hardly be settled otherwise. Not only is there no definite rule laid down by common understanding, but the effect of public worship on the worshipper is so complex and so various, that it would be very inexpedient to lay down such a rule. The minds of some are so constituted, that it would be a mockery to them to take part in a service not framed in exact accordance with their theological convictions; to others, again, quite as genuinely religious, but more influenced by sympathies and associations, the element of intellectual agreement appears less important.

If it be replied, that to take part in a religious service without intellectual agreement is, after all, incompatible with perfect sincerity, it may be answered, that no layman is bound to take any more part in a

service than he desires. Nor is this a mere evasion. The hypocrisy of a symbolical act depends upon the interpretation generally put upon it. Now there is a very definite common understanding, that every one who utters words before others, utters them in the sense commonly attached to them; but there is no such understanding that a man, by his mere bodily presence, where words are uttered by others, implies that he holds the beliefs which they express, or the assumptions which they involve. If it be still said that such bodily presence without mental assent is alien to the Protestant conception of public worship, and, *pro tanto*, converts the service into a ceremonial, I must admit it, and should only maintain that the Protestant conception of public worship is an ideal to which, in the present state of religious thought, we should only attempt to approximate.

On the other hand, no one can feel more strongly than I do that, if the religious life of the nation is to be in a healthy state, we ought continually to try and approximate to this ideal as far as possible, as far as is consistent with the inevitable conditions of national worship.

And, firstly, if we acquiesce in a formula of worship that only represents the convictions of a majority of worshippers, we may, at any rate, reasonably endeavour to secure that it does represent the convictions of a majority. And this can only be effectually secured by the frank and firm avowal, on all proper occasions, on

the part of the laity,* of all serious and deliberate doctrinal disagreement with any portion of the service; that so we may know more clearly than we do at present when public opinion is ripe for any alteration. There is little doubt, however, that the existing Anglican service, compiled in the sixteenth century from mediæval formulæ of devotion, does not, in certain points, correspond to the convictions even of a majority of habitual worshippers in Anglican churches. Some of these, perhaps, might be altered decisively by immediate legislation; but it seems more desirable, on the whole, to modify the Act of Uniformity, and to relax the rigidity with which the service, the whole service, and nothing but the service, is now imposed upon every Anglican congregation. The difficulty of doing this, as long as the rigidity of the law provides the only protection to the laity against the idiosyncrasies and vagaries of the clergy, I admit to be very great; but this difficulty would vanish if the demand of which I have previously spoken were satisfied, and some legal, regular control over the administration of their church allowed to each congregation.

But, secondly, if the majority have a right to claim that the service should be framed to suit their devotional needs, and therefore in accordance with their dogmatic convictions, the minority, on the other hand, may respectfully urge that these dogmatic convictions need not be introduced in such a manner as to give the maximum of offence to those who do not

* I assume that we are agreed upon a definition of this body.

hold them, and at the same time produce the minimum of devotional effect. The formal recital of creeds is neither a natural expression of the sentiment of worship, nor obviously effective in stimulating devotion; and the proper place for such abridged statements of doctrine, even supposing them accurately to express the convictions of the existing generation of churchmen (which can hardly be said of our present creeds), would appear to be a manual of instruction rather than a formula of worship.

This question of the recital of creeds and of the dogmatic assumptions of the service generally, takes a different aspect when we consider the position of the officiating minister. It brings us face to face with the question evaded as regards laymen, May a man use words in a non-natural sense, a sense which, according to ordinary acceptance of language, they will not bear? No one, I think, who has reflected carefully on this question, will think it admits of a simple reply. Unfortunately, a great many who have not carefully reflected do think so; and the result of leaving the question to be settled by the obscure working of conscientious instinct is that very little opportunity is given for establishing a rational and moderate view

The case is one which it is peculiarly undesirable to leave to conscientious instinct, as the obvious arguments on the one side are so strong, that many do not wait to see whether they are counterbalanced by still stronger arguments on the other. There is no moral rule so simple, so easily comprehended, as the rule

of strict veracity of speech: no virtue in which it seems more necessary that a minister of religion should at any rate not fall below the ordinary standard; there is no case in which it is more repugnant to natural feeling that this rule should be violated, than in the deliberate and daily renewed utterance, with all possible solemnity of place and time, of religious belief and aspiration. There is no danger to religion which an earnest person more deplores and dreads than that there should insinuate itself into his religious exercises a sense of their shadowiness and unreality: a feeling that the view of the universe which they are framed to suit is not precisely that which his innermost self actually takes; that it does not quite correspond to the principles upon which he, on the whole, intends to act; does not represent the sum of his knowledge and belief respecting the facts of the world and life. This feeling Ritualism endeavours to crush by availing itself of all possible stimulants to the imagination. To the Protestant, whose sense of the spirituality of worship is offended by these, the only substitute for them is a persuasion of the utter sincerity of the minister speaking in the name of the congregation. If it be once admitted that the minister may speak to never so small an extent as a play-actor, or an automaton, this persuasion seems irretrievably shattered.

The force of these considerations is undeniable; but reflection shows, that if allowed to operate unqualified, they render an educated ministry and a perfectly uniform

worship an impossible combination. As all human work is imperfect, it is probable that the most carefully constructed form of prayer, especially so elaborate a one as that of the Church of England, must necessarily have blemishes which will reasonably offend many persons among the majority to whose opinions it is designed to correspond. It will very likely be found to involve irreconcilable inconsistencies, if naturally interpreted. But however it may begin, in the progress of religious thought, it will inevitably become less and less adapted to the views of the age. This may not be always due to doctrinal change. Some portions of it may obviously contemplate a state of the Church different from that which subsequently comes to exist, others may breathe sentiments with which we cannot really sympathize. Now I by no means think that this growing want of adaptation should be acquiesced in. In fact, I have proposed that the Act of Uniformity should be abolished, and greater flexibility allowed in the use of the service; in this way the parts that were generally distasteful might become known, and from time to time removed from the books. But however smooth and flexible the machinery of change was made, there would always be a period during which public opinion was being formed with respect to each alteration. And to say that during this period no one who was in favour of the change should perform the functions of the ministry, would be to lay down a rule so practically ruinous, that the most rigid moral theorist must recoil from it. I have myself no strong desire, as will presently appear, that,

with theological thought in its present chaotic state, advanced thinkers should occupy the pulpits of the established Church. It seems to me impossible that a man can satisfactorily perform the functions of pastor if his opinions are not more or less in harmony with those of his flock. But it is intolerable that he should be chained down (I do not mean by law, but by common opinion as to his duty) to perpetual agreement with the least progressive section of them. In a natural state of things, he ought to be the first to see distinctly, while others are only obscurely feeling, the incongruity between the prayers he has to read and the real beliefs of his generation; and when the time is ripe for the removal of this incongruity, he ought to take a prominent part in its removal.

While, then, I cannot but regard it as an evil that a clergyman should speak in church any words that he cannot speak with sincerity, it seems to me an evil that we must accept, and should only try to minimize. And one way of minimizing it, the way to which I especially wish to direct attention, is by making our conceptions as clear as possible in respect of the amount of deviation from strict sincerity to be permitted. It is a universal principle of ethics, that if any exceptions are to be admitted to a moral rule, the exceptions should in their turn be made as regular as possible. I do not mean that a definite line can be drawn. Most would agree that the deviations should be neither numerous nor important. But no one could fix the number, and no two persons would agree

precisely as to the importance of any particular deviation. But if each minister, maintaining deliberately that a certain amount of divergence was legitimate and inevitable, would openly avow his own, a great gain would be achieved. On the one hand, the reasonableness of the principle would, I think, appear after argument, even to persons who at first were startled by its laxity. On the other hand, the attention of the laity would be directed to the value of sincerity in devotional expression. We should get rid entirely of the sophistries and evasions which now, I think, do more than anything else to tarnish the clerical reputation for veracity.

Of course individuals would take different views of their duty, as they do now. Persons of the same views would draw the line, some for, some against themselves. It is impossible to avoid this ; and, perhaps, if our wish is to maintain delicacy of sentiment while meeting practical exigencies, it is not altogether desirable to avoid it. But I think that the present almost appalling divergence of opinion among honourable and conscientious clergymen on this subject, would be much reduced if the question were debated openly before the public, with a full recognition of its difficulties, and a sober determination to solve them in the best possible way. Such casuistical questions are no doubt odious to common sense, but when they are also practical questions, it is especially important that the attention of common sense,—that is, of the mass of well-intentioned, intelligent, and disinterested persons,—should be

called to them. It is only in this way that we can neutralize and dispel at once the special sophistries that tempt, and the singular scruples that beset, an individual thinker shaping his private conduct in solitude.

As this view of the inevitable insincerity (to some extent) of the Anglican ministry will be new to many persons, and distasteful to those to whom it is new, it may be as well to illustrate it by some examples. It will be new, not because most persons have not noticed passages in the Anglican service which, taken in their obvious sense, do not correspond to ordinary belief, but because they have supposed or heard of some other sense in which they might be taken. And where the new meaning is one which the words will fairly bear, we ought certainly to accept it, and be thankful that a venerable formula will adapt itself to the changing beliefs and sentiments of men, without needing the rude touch of a reformer. But where this new meaning cannot be imported without violent straining of language, it seems to me less troublesome, and certainly not more injurious to our habits of sincerity, to admit that the words have become meaningless to the speaker. Two curiously contrasted instances of this occur naturally: the perfect confidence in the future happiness of all members of the Church of England apparently expressed in the Burial Service, and the unhesitating condemnation of the unorthodox prescribed by the Athanasian Creed.*

* The Privy Council appear to have decided, that the punishment of the unorthodox need not be believed to be "everlasting

But to make more clear the distinction that I have been trying to draw, I will compare two clauses of the Apostles' Creed, preferring these from the peculiar prominence given to that formula in the Anglican services. I may perhaps remark, that I have no personal ground for the distinction which I draw between them, as I am equally unable to assent to either.

The first is the clause affirming a belief in "the Resurrection of the Body." I do not see how these words can, without straining, be understood, except as asserting a belief that bodies, in some sense the same as those which have been buried, will, at a certain time, emerge from the surface of the earth. But, as far as I can ascertain, the majority of even orthodox laity, and many of the clergy, do not believe this; holding, rather, that the soul's life, though continued after death, will continue in some way incomplete until the termination of the present life of humanity on the earth, and that then its vitality will be perfected by its being (in some sense) re-embodied. Now, it seems to me an evil, that men should go on saying one of these things and believing the other. Still, we should all feel that a man was over-scrupulous who declined to perform ministerial functions solely on the ground that he held the latter of these beliefs instead of the former.

in the ordinary sense of the word. I think it right to accept their decision, though I cannot here follow their arguments. But I do not raise this question. A clergyman, though himself a rigid Trinitarian, may easily be unable to convince himself that every one, except a rigid Trinitarian, is doomed to even remotely terminable punishment.

I will compare with this the belief that Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary. A man may certainly be a sincere Christian in the strictest sense—that is, he may believe that Jesus was God—without holding this belief. Many persons now take an intermediate view of miracles between accepting and rejecting them *en bloc*. They hold that miracles may occur, and that some recorded in the Gospel undoubtedly did occur; but that also legends may have been mixed up with the evangelical narrations, and that some probably have been. A man who holds this general view is very likely to reject the miraculous conception of Jesus, as the narrative of it has a very legendary aspect, and the evidence which supports it is exceptionally weak. Now, to him, this rejection may appear of no religious importance; it may even seem to him unreasonable that men should make their view of Christ's character and function to depend upon the nature of his conception. Still, to the majority of Christians, the belief is so important—the gulf that divides those who hold it from those who reject it seems so great, that the confidence of a congregation in the veracity of their minister would be entirely ruined, if he avowed his disbelief in this doctrine and still continued to recite the Creed. And it seems to me, that a man who acts thus, can only justify himself by proving the most grave and urgent social necessity for his conduct.

I have discussed the amount of belief imposed on a minister by prescribed formularies, apart from the consideration of the subscriptions or declarations that

he may have made on admission to his ministerial functions. If the duty of fidelity to engagements impose stricter bonds of dogma than the duty of veracious utterance, the discussion of the latter ceases to be practical. What the exact force of the new form of subscription, as imposed on the clergy by Mr. Buxton's Bill, may be, I am not lawyer enough to decide; indeed, it may be said that the complete decision of the point lies still hidden in the breasts of our judges. But, as far as I can judge, the "general assent" expressly given by subscription, just corresponds to the general agreement which the mere fact of reading the service ought to involve. And it may be remarked, that in deciding cases of alleged heresy under the new Act, judges will have to solve the difficulty just now mentioned, of drawing the line at which particular dissent becomes incompatible with general assent; which will be some compensation for the serious evils of such prosecutions.

I am aware that it has been contended, that even under the old law the condition of more or less free-thinking clergymen was very enduring. "The legal obligation," it is said, "is the measure of the moral one; and the looseness of the legal obligation was shown by the impossibility of convicting the Essayists and Reviewers." Now, in one sense, I think it very important to maintain, that the legal obligation is the measure of the moral one. The formularies ought not to be regarded as of private interpretation; the sense in which each individual assents to them is the sense in

which they are commonly understood ; and the interpretation put on them by a Law Court must be taken as an authorized declaration of the common understanding. And no doubt there are important points, such as the inspiration of Scripture, where the liberty allowed by the formularies turns out to be much greater than was supposed. But any one who will study the principles of interpretation and judgment—the major premises of the judicial syllogism—as laid down by the Privy Council in the *Gorham* case, will, I think, convince himself that the cause of the acquittal of the Essayists and Reviewers was, not that the opinions communicated by their writings to most readers proved to be consistent with the formularies, but that it was impossible to obtain the complete proof required that they had explicitly expressed these opinions. Now, if by saying that the legal obligation is the measure of the moral one, it is meant that a man cannot be guilty of having broken an engagement unless he can be convicted by a Court of having done so, the principle is hardly one which we can wish the guardians of social morality to maintain.

It is said, however, that just as the legal restrictions on clerical teaching are practically relaxed by the difficulty of conviction, so the moral obligation has become gradually lighter through a tacit general understanding. And no doubt there is such a tacit understanding, only, unfortunately, it is by no means a general one. It is confined to the liberal clergy and a certain small number of educated laymen who sympathize with their

difficult position. It is an understanding to which they dare not publicly appeal in favour of a dissent which they dare not openly avow. *Some* relaxation, a certain limited dissent, would be admitted by all sensible persons ; it is difficult to draw a line, and some persons interested take advantage of the difficulty to draw it in their own favour, at a vast distance from the place that common sense vaguely contemplates. In many other professions we find a similar tendency towards an esoteric standard of professional morality. The advocate who urges for his client what he knows to be false ; the politician who bribes with shut eyes and intimidates without a threatening gesture ; the tradesman whose wares are not what they seem,—can similarly appeal to a sort of common understanding which legitimates their conduct, the public opinion of their particular section of the public. And just as, by the simple populace, a lawyer has been roughly called a liar, and a tradesman a rogue, so to the priesthood has been attributed a disposition to practise solemn imposture. But surely if this esoteric morality is an evil anywhere, it is a disastrous evil in the profession whose function it is to propagate morality. A distinguished politician* lately declared, that he attributed the decay of commercial integrity partly to the way in which honourable and conscientious men had taught themselves to play fast and loose with solemn obligations.

Hoc fonte derivata clades

In patriam populumque fluxit.

* Mr. W. E. Forster.

Without going so far as this, it must be allowed that we look to the clergy to maintain the standard of, at any rate, the peaceful virtues ; and that it is a serious blow to the spiritual interests of the country, that any considerable and respectable section of them should be charged with habitual unverity and be unable to refute the charge.

The reply made to all this is simple, and certainly forcible : it is said, that this strict interpretation of clerical engagements would impose on the educated clergy a burden so intolerable, that no abstract arguments will induce men to bear it. The more familiar a man becomes with the present state of theology, the more he endeavours to assimilate the results of recent research, and understand the controversies which are now being carried on, the more he will find that there is no sort of agreement among theologians in respect of principles, method, or conclusions ; that there is a complete scale of opinions, reaching from the extreme of mediæval orthodoxy to the extreme of pure Theism, each separated from the other by a small interval, or shading imperceptibly into it ; all held by men of undoubted learning, ability, and character, and almost all by men of apparent fervour and piety, and declared attachment to the religion of Christ. In front of this scale we now place an intelligent and promising young clergyman ; we impress on him the need which the Church has of a learned clergy ; we bid him read, study, investigate ; we encourage him (as his better nature prompts him) to respect learning and sincerity

wherever he finds them, and to weigh arguments with the single desire to be convinced of the truth. But we inform him, that if Truth should appear to him to lie anywhere below a certain line drawn rather high up in the scale, honour and duty call upon him to withdraw from his ministerial functions, resign the prospects of his career, uproot himself from a position where he may feel that his means of exercising good influence are daily growing, allow his acquired faculties of special work to become useless, and, amid the distress of his friends and kindred, with his abandoned profession hanging like a weight round his neck, endeavour, late in life, to learn some new work by which he may live. We will assume that such a man, before ordination, has been brought, by a use of the proper text-books, to the exact official creed of Anglican clergymen. But how can he ever be sure that his study, as it increases in comprehensiveness, will still point steadily to this complex of conclusions? And what man will study with such a sword of Damocles suspended over his desk? No one will venture to be ordained except those who are too fanatical or too stupid to doubt that they will always believe exactly what they believed at twenty-three. And can it be borne that the immense power which the Church [of England] must necessarily wield for good or for evil should be entirely in the hands of such men as these?

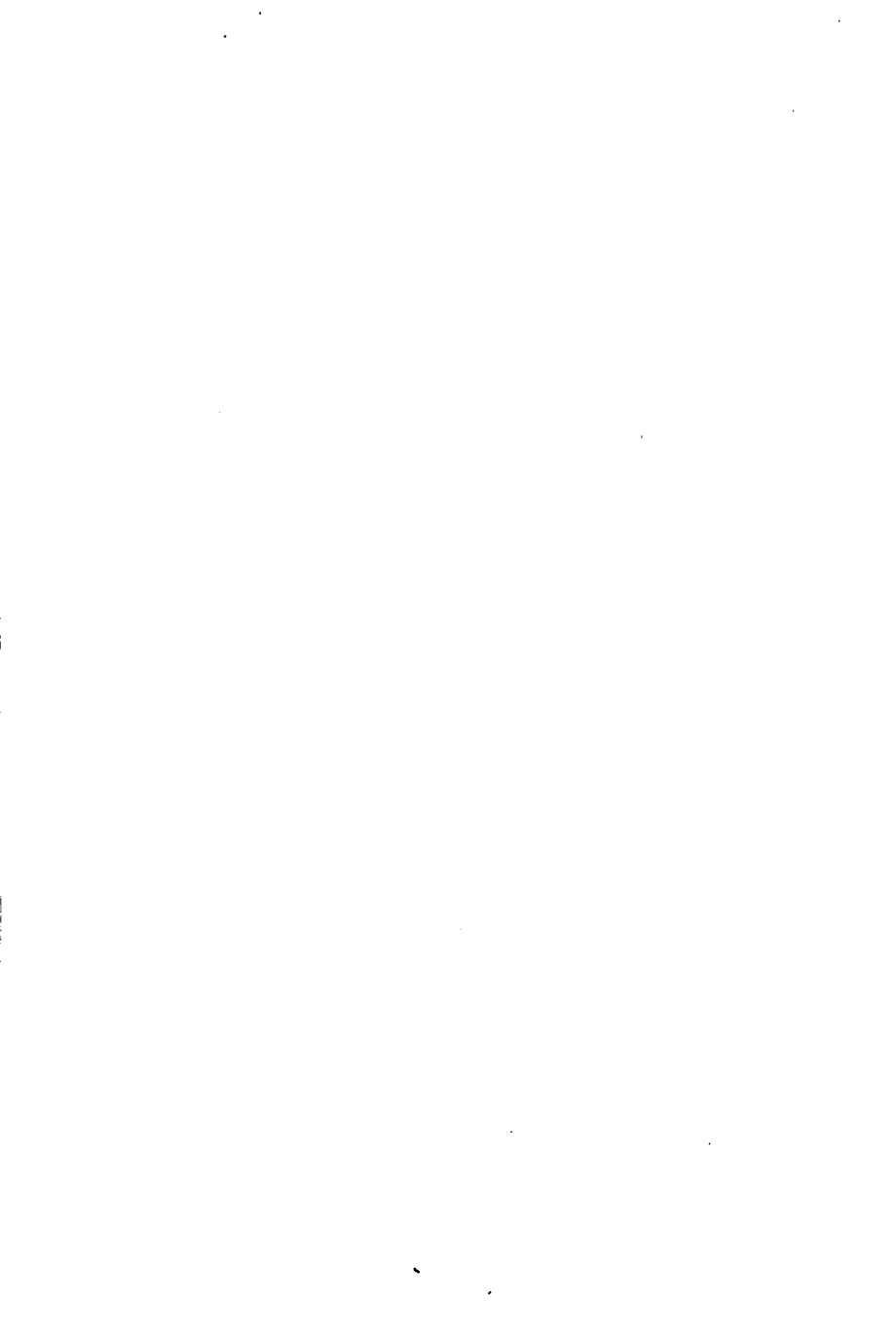
This prospect is certainly one in which no reflective person—of those, at any rate, who are likely to read this pamphlet—will willingly acquiesce. Let us strain every nerve to avoid it, only let it be by openly relaxing

the engagements, not by secretly tampering with their obligation. I am confident of ultimate success in such a cause, if we only fight with fair weapons. Until we do so, I feel that we scarcely deserve to succeed. We cannot get people to take a strong interest in grievances by which no one will declare himself aggrieved; to remove burdens under which those who ought to feel them most galling appear perfectly comfortable. As it is, the present state of things, misrepresented and misunderstood, is actually made the subject of mutual congratulations—in many instances perfectly sincere. “What a church is mine,” thinks many a contemplative layman, of generous sympathies, but vague theological conceptions; “so orthodox, and yet so liberal; so definite, and yet so comprehensive; so able to retain the old, and yet not reject the new; so adorned with divines of the most various tendencies and habits of thought, some clinging closely to the traditions of the past, others sympathizing with every movement of modern thought, yet all, of course, substantially agreed; exaggerating, perhaps, their little differences, somewhat bitter about the trifles that separate them, occasionally even fretting at the indulgence of the Church that gathers them all within her ample embrace,—yet all loyal to her, all prepared at any moment to recite her fine old creeds, and sign her carefully constructed Articles.” If the hollowness of this dream of harmony could be shown, even with some emphasis, some rudeness of shock; if the actual state of opinion could be freely declared, and its consequences frankly faced;

then we might fairly try what the spirit of compromise and conciliation, which, after all, is a virtue and not a vice of the Church of England, could do towards harmonizing the inevitable conditions of a national ministry with the inexorable demands of theological thought.



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